

Based On a True Story: Postmodern Political Consciousness in the Cinematic Narrative

Oh! I haven't shown you a picture of my wife! Here she is: my angel. I tell people she actually looks like an angel, you see here? The white looks like a halo on her head. Can you see that? She's my angel. You're picking that up on your cameras there? They probably won't keep that in the film but...

District 9, feature film, 2009

Introduction

Something happened to reality and it will never be the same again. The realism infusing Western culture is nothing new, of course. A veritable cult of the search for an ever less varnished truth has flooded every significant mode of expression in successive, albeit sometimes ebbing, waves, since the time of the Renaissance. This has not just brought us more of the same, however: a fixed or even immortal reference-point outside art to which art is increasingly held accountable. When someone says to us 'You're picking that up on your cameras there?' we feel its palpable realism, but this sense of reality is profoundly influenced by technological and social changes embodied, among other things, in the acknowledgement of the film medium itself. What we may have overlooked in this process, so easily taken for granted by the heirs of The Enlightenment, is that reality itself is taking on a new meaning. Before long, those of us who grew up in the old 'Modern world' – inherited from Enlightenment philosophers and historians – will no longer recognise it at all! As presented by visual media, the character of reality depends on the way you look at it and with the latest pop-culture wave of verisimilitude, from 'docudrama' to 'mockumentary' to 'reality' TV, the subtle complexity of 'the real' has become increasingly important and illustrative. It is much

more than a curiosity. I will argue that it expresses the epistemic impression of a major cultural sea-change and an attribute, in its broadest terms, of a major social and political transformation.

Social change and culture

John Ruggie introduces the idea that the profundity of social change might be measured (albeit with no mathematical precision implied) by the cognitive impression it leaves on human beings themselves. He does not intend, in this regard, an impression in the sense of a powerful recollection, but something much more categorical and somatic, characterised as ‘epistemic’ (1983; 1993). Though its prioritisation is left unstated in his sketch of three dimensions of change (of which the others are material and institutional-strategic) the most profound alteration possible is implicitly that which occurs in the Arendtian ‘human condition’, a shift of perspective or ‘world view’ that is so fundamental as to constitute a transformation of the way people, in general, think and see. This is what John Berger might characterise as a change in our collective, customary ‘ways of seeing’ (1972). The power of social changes to effect an overarching reorientation of the quality of our collective existence rests ultimately on their evincing a major shift in how such lives are organised in their broadest sweep.

Ruggie’s implicit assumption is thus that a major cognitive shift will be a necessary accompaniment to this kind of sweeping political reconstruction. As such, a major cognitive shift, or epistemic reorientation of a society’s various cultural expressions, becomes the definitive measure – the high watermark – of political transformation. Its embryonic signs might thus be canvassed as a kind of psycho-social vanguard of a coming – or latent – institutional reordering. The evidence to support this supposition is provided by the emergence of a novel collectivising individualism expressed in a whole range of cultural forms at the close of the medieval era. The evidence’s weight rests on the concomitant transformation and eclipse of feudalism, and the emergence of a juridical society and state-centric political order reflecting that individualism.

The prospects for plotting the depth and direction of contemporary trends by looking for evidence of continuity or change in cultural expressions (and hence an underlying cognitive ‘reality’ or episteme) are only briefly considered in Ruggie’s influential work. The

aim of this paper is to take such provisional exploration a little further and contextualise the evaluation of change in terms of a debate in social theory about the arguable epochal character of contemporary trends. Even where this question is not taken up explicitly, most analysts take an implicit position in their choice of terminology and effective characterisation of change. Anthony Giddens, for example, understands globalisation as the contemporary expression of the unfolding logic of intrinsically *Modern* processes (1990). David Harvey (1989), on the other hand, adopts a more ambivalent position, embracing the language of ‘postmodern’ cultural expression, but grounding this in an account of underlying developments in a continuing process of capitalist (and hence Modern) social reproduction and material accumulation.

Harvey sees the ‘postmodern’ turn in Western and global culture as rooted in a far from novel but renewed round of ‘time-space compression’. Capitalism’s innate drive to enhance productivity leads to continual acceleration of the pace, and expansion of the scope, of productive activity, and hence of social reproduction more generally. This is a continual process punctuated by major overhauls of the social organisation of production, the most notable being the industrial revolution of the late 1700s, which concentrated the manufacture of commodities in large capitalist-owned factories. This entailed a rigorous division of labour, facilitated by the emergence of a more mobile and malleable *wage*-labour force, to replace the early Modern era’s contractual networks of artisans and merchants.¹ Further ‘revolutions’ can be observed, according to Harvey, first, in the Fordist automation and still greater concentration of production of the early 20th Century and, second, in its closing decades, the ‘post-Fordist’ disaggregation of the factory into tightly coordinated but flexibly organised networks of transnational production, global ‘factories’ adapting as needed to exploit locally advantageous factor costs or regulatory conditions, and expanding the scale and pace of production beyond the restrictive ambit of the single site.

Harvey’s argument, as such, suggests nothing more than an intensification of a familiar category of experiences and their associated cultural expressions. These may betray the effects of major modifications made to our key modes of social organisation, but are nonetheless readily understood as differences of degree rather than kind. The familiar Enlightenment ‘project’ to extract sense and even a theory of progress from the disorientating flux created by capitalist production and society would appear to persist, albeit in a more piquant and perhaps more disillusioned form. The discussion which follows is intended to throw this implicit assumption of Harvey’s into question.

We might begin with Harvey's own plausible suggestion that the construction of mutually accepted and acceptable accounts of space and time are central to the functioning and reproduction of any social order. Such an emphasis on the central role played by the construction of time and space is shared by many in the field of sociology and beyond, including the influential Bourdieu (1989). If we wish to evaluate the novelty of new social forms and their associated understandings, it is thus to these fundamental categories of time and space that we should pay closest attention. I will argue in the passages which follow that closer examination of the time-space compression of, in the contemporary context, a globalising society, reveals something more than a difference of degree in intensifying an existing tendency within the organisation of capitalist production. It reveals a profound disjunction or turning-point in the modern political subject's understanding of her place within, and movement through, the world. This represents no less than the signs of a basic shift of world-view, that is, an epistemic sea-change of genuinely transformational proportions.

It has been suggested that a distinguishing cultural trait of Western society is its emphasis of the visual at the expense of the other senses (Berger, 1972; Jenks, 2002). Certainly Modern Western (and Western-influenced global) popular culture appears to be heavily dominated by image and imagery in its various guises, from cinema to television to internet. The products of visual media would thus seem a good place to begin our investigation of contemporary cultural and epistemic change. These also seem to be the most quintessentially modern and capitalist, in replicating the mechanisation and automation engendered by successive waves of industrialisation (Benjamin, 2005 [1936]). The focus within this broad cultural output takes its point of departure in the work of political philosopher and historian Hannah Arendt and her account of the foundations and shifting character of 'the human condition'.

Arendt (1958) suggests that the 'worldly' reality of human affairs depends on the capacity to record them in one or another narrative form. The fleeting ephemerality of action² must be mediated, before it slips into an inevitable nullifying silence and invisibility, by its appearance in a common domain – a public realm – of apprehension and hence, to a lesser or greater degree, of memorability. Such collective memory, the reality of collective experience or 'the world' as it is understood in human terms, including its recorded history, depends on the stories told about the actions taken. In short, human reality depends on memory which depends on narrative. Hence the narrative form is a cross-cultural phenomenon and a human fundament, rooted in, among other things, the basic cognitive structures that circumscribe and

shape the way we process, store and re-access our experiences as a kind of sense-data.³ Moreover, narratives and especially what poststructuralists or postmodernists⁴ disparagingly refer to as ‘grand narratives’ have had a tremendously important role to play in the social understandings that seem to bind together a Modern and Modernist society. Modern history itself as a story of rational progress is perhaps the epistemic lynchpin of an identifiable Western, individualist and aggressively globalising culture. It therefore seems plausible to suppose that in examining the construction of narrative one is close to the essence of Modern life and its culture. It is here, if anywhere, that profound political, social and culture changes are likely to leave their impression. Thus it is to the changing construction of narrative as it occurs in popular culture, most particularly in its visual media, that we now turn in our investigation and evaluation of the character of contemporary social change.

‘Classic’ cinematic narrative

What follows is a brief sketch of the dramatic form of cinema as it has taken shape since the invention of the medium of film in the late 19th Century. Film’s nascent and relatively brief ‘silent era’ entailed considerable experimentation, unsurprisingly, given the palpable novelty of the new medium. The self-conscious cinematic *tour-de-force* of Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* of 1929 stands out in this respect. Its desultory capture of elements of a single day anticipated, on a technical level, the more intensive exploitation of fast cutting and editing, which reached its peak half a century or more later, in the heyday of the popular music video. More interestingly, it pioneered the possibilities of film as a means of expressing shifts of view and association redolent of free association or dreams. With the advent of ‘talkies’ and a more intensive commercialisation, however, the cinematic form increasingly built on longstanding theatrical antecedents, soon to be echoed, in turn, in the conventions of television drama. Its essence, as it has unfolded through the increasing international domination of the Hollywood movie industry, has been a certain kind of visual storytelling. Only in the 1990s have films in wide distribution been disrupted by artistic innovations which might broadly be described as postmodern. Some of the more fundamental of these, I believe, can be argued to constitute major assaults on the character of experience or perception itself. Such challenges to the praxis of ‘modern cinema’ are sufficiently fundamental that they can most usefully be related to the almost universal essentials of the

model. The details of such a model, its various specific genres of exposition, from romantic comedy to melodrama, need not concern us here.

Perhaps the most important foundation-stone is to be found in the way cinematic narrative builds upon a certain kind of perspective. Perspective is in itself a matter of the terms and reference points of imagery or visual representation rather than narrative, but it will become clear that this is fundamental to the form of narrative entailed. The point of perspective provides the frame in which the narrative must unfold. Photographic representations have typically followed, perhaps largely by mechanistic default, the example of Renaissance painting (and its own use, suggested by some, most famously by David Hockney [2008] of an early *camera obscura*) in presenting a single-point perspective, a kind of fixed 'window on the world'. 'Art in the age of mechanical reproduction', as Walter Benjamin puts it, has however introduced a novel paradox or tension into this perspective. As Benjamin suggests, this reflects some important, distinguishing characteristics of the new, photographic, forms of representation (2005 [1936]).

The paradox perhaps emerges most clearly in those efforts made to resist it. This is nowhere more apparent than in that representational experiment, unique in Hollywood, and hence a testimony to its failure, of Robert Montgomery's directorial debut, *The Lady in the Lake*, which premiered in 1947. Montgomery's radical innovation was to present the action literally (rather than metaphorically, as existing cinematic convention dictated) from the point of view of its chief protagonist, Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe. The interesting question, in this regard, is why the experiment failed for, as a contemporary reviewer pointed out, it isn't long before 'the novelty begins to wear thin' (New York Times, 1947). The answer must lie, at least partly, in the nature of the experiment as an attempt to resist the inherent character of this still relatively novel medium. In essence, *The Lady in the Lake* suffers from the attempt to work against the grain of moving pictures as a form of representation.

In a way, Montgomery attempts to return the visual field more precisely to the conventions of Renaissance painting in which we are asked, *en masse*, as all viewers, to share in the artist's specific vantage-point, that is, one located very precisely in space and time: a geometrically delimited visual field at a specific instant captured from his experience. We are invited to see through his eyes, as the audience of *The Lady in the Lake* were invited to see through Marlowe's eyes. What exactly was it that made the latter invitation so much less appealing than the former? Paradoxically, the attempt to mimic the protagonist's visual field, and thereby give the film as strong an individual centre of gravity as possible, completely

backfires. Instead the film creates a kind of referential emptiness at the pivotal centre of the action. This, incidentally, is also the source of whatever residual and melancholy charm the piece retains, at its most piquant and even unsettling in those moments when the image of the protagonist is captured – as if by chance – in a mirror.

The unprecedented power of moving pictures lies in their capacity to evoke in dynamic movement and, where called for, startlingly unadorned detail (courtesy of the ubiquitous close-up), the experience and emotional journey of their human subjects.⁵ Moreover, cinema has already developed a more appropriate way to harness the medium and shackle its peculiar capacities to a project far from alien to a Leonardo or Michelangelo. The paradoxical character of Modern individualism is reflected in the way ‘the window on the world’ is opened to many as an authoritative view. Individuals, as conceived, most influentially by Thomas Hobbes, in the abstract and undifferentiated, are equals (1996 [1651]). Authorship is nevertheless hierarchical and collectivist – as Hobbes also understood. The author is first among equals whose equality lies in their capacity to share in the self-evident appropriateness of the authoritative view. It is thus the *auteur* we follow through the action of a feature-film. In this way it mimics the modern novel, whose typical third-person singular tense nevertheless is able to oscillate its point of reference between observer and protagonist by use of certain conventional cues, narrowing the “narrative distance” from the subject (Lothe, 2005: 34-8). These signal quite unmistakably, at least in great fiction, when the reader should be interpreting ‘the third person’ to encapsulate a kind of quasi-first-person tense:

“The Grand is a very unusual café.”

“You don’t sound as though you mean that.”

Oh yes. The Grand was the gathering place for everyone of any importance. There sat the world’s greatest painters, the world’s most promising young men, the world’s most well-dressed ladies, the world’s most able editors, the world’s greatest writers. There they sat putting on airs for each other’s benefit – each one basking in the other’s recognition. “I’ve seen nobodies sitting there elated because other nobodies acknowledged them.”

His remarks shocked everybody. Reinert leaned over Miss Kielland’s chair and said in a stage whisper: “I’ve never heard such pompous nonsense.”

She quickly glanced at Nagel. He must have heard what Reinert said, but he didn’t seem offended. On the contrary. He was drinking with the

student Øien and, looking very unconcerned, he began to talk about something else. In fact, his air of superiority irritated her too. God knows what he must think of them if he felt he could take the liberty of being so insolent! (Hamsun, 2006: 80)

The ironic description of The Grand Café presents the perspective and reflections of Nagel himself, the novel's central figure. Constructed as "free indirect discourse", this allows an ambiguous union of perspective between narrator and protagonist (Lothe, 2005: 47). We discover through the following exchanges, however, that these thoughts must have been expressed aloud, more or less verbatim. They thus reflect a key peculiarity of the eccentric hero, his disarming honesty. The discovery that these words have been spoken is assisted by a shift to the third-person 'proper' which follows with the observation that '[h]is remarks shocked everybody'. Another seamless transition then shifts perspective yet again, now to the vantage-point of Miss Kielland who registers the indignation Nagel has so mischievously – and fascinatingly – provoked.

The important thing to note about this narrative practice is that the reader is drawn into layers of identification. On the one hand, one will adopt the viewpoint of a number of different characters as a way of enriching the palette of the narrative picture. Nevertheless one is drawn in particular to the novel's pivotal perspective, that of the hero or protagonist. This is not only because this is the perspective most commonly adopted. Its domination is not first and foremost a consequence of the quantity of relevant tenses. It reflects more importantly the evaluative reference-point of the narrator and, by implication, the author, which the reader is invited or even obliged to share. The genuine third-person singular may or may not literally dominate, but the close identification of the narrator (and hence typically the reader) with the values and beliefs of the protagonist means he will often operate as his proxy. Nagel's assessment of The Grand Café expresses not only a disarming honesty but also a searing, ironical insight that the reader will find hard to resist. Nagel's words and perspective in this respect belong, above all, to the author himself. On one level it may be just the perspective of one individual among many, but on another it is the voice of authority.⁶ The fact that cinema typically replicates this 'authoritative-collectivist individualism' to be found in the modern novel, as well as theatre, is testimony to the persistence of film-makers in resisting the inherent pluralism of their medium.

The classic cinematic narrative typically presents the story of a coherent experience or episode in the life of one specific individual. What typically lends the story coherence is its

having constituted a revealing emotional journey for this individual. The plot should uncover important aspects of her (or, more typically, his) personality or identity and, in the challenges encountered, become a powerful learning experience and, ideally, a significant change within the very being of the person herself, most likely in a categorically positive way. By the conclusion of the narrative, the protagonist is somehow altered, the result of a process of ‘personal growth’. Examples abound from the widest variety of genres and periods. The hero of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, from 1946, for example, learns greater self-awareness, of his own virtues especially, as well as those of the people who comprise the small-town environs in which he had for so long felt himself to be trapped.

Such stories – or episodes – operate in, and are made meaningful by, a broader epistemic context. They therefore reflect and illustrate a prevailing cultural praxis or ‘world view’, which represents a kind of narrative individualism. In these terms, the cinematic narrative customarily implies a preceding and ensuing intelligible life-story. Implicitly, events selected and represented will invariably constitute a chapter or episode (and usually a decisive one) in the integrated and meaningful life-story as a whole. This story affirms and cements the sense of ‘self’ or personal identity, so important to a society where a broader, contextual meaning, tied to social and physical place (and, not least, hierarchy) have receded. The epistemic shape of storytelling thus reflects the individualistic epistemic shape attributed to life. Hannah Arendt famously suggests that identity can ultimately only be arbitrated by the storytelling of others, and only definitively upon or after the moment of death (1958). The legalistic individualism of Western society nevertheless tends to affirm the principle if not the praxis that the right of self-definition (if not determination) rests with the individual herself. Some evidence of this tendency is to be found in the increasing prevalence of the autobiographic form in popular writing.⁷

It should be acknowledged that the intelligible shape lent to both life-story and its subplots reflects in some degree fundamental qualities of human perception and cognition per se (Jervis, 1976). Such intelligibility, derived from the narrative’s logical connections and structures of meaning, allows for economical (as in selective) storage in, and reliable retrieval from, the repository of memory. Hence memory in general tends to overemphasise the structured and orderly character of experience, and the more distant the memory the more pronounced this overemphasis is inclined to be. Such considerations of simplicity and order, it should be noted, also shape perceptions themselves, editing out, in many instances, unnecessary and/or anomalous details.⁸ The written representation of speech, upon which the film’s spoken words typically draw, is thus not simply a formalised cipher for its more

inchoate verbal source. Rather it reflects the more logically complete and rationally parsimonious cognitive processing of the raw phenomenon (as immediately apprehended by the senses) proper to memorisation. Speech is stored by our memories in accordance with the orderly form (and consistently observed rules) of a fully explicated system of communication. In these terms, the written and cinematic forms of dialogue are rather close to how it tends to be remembered. This is partly why dramatic dialogue can appear to us to be natural and uncontrived, however conspicuously its ‘artificiality’ is betrayed by an analytical comparison with the transcript of any ‘everyday’ (and instantaneous) conversation.⁹

The ‘Realist’ turn

It would be strange to consider the trend away from the classic narrative model described above without placing it in the frame of broadly postmodernist or post-structuralist tendencies in Western culture. The immediate paradox this appears to engender is the suggestion that postmodernism, often associated with the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences, can be understood as a form of realism.¹⁰ At least at first sight this may indeed seem perplexing, given that the academic movement of postmodernism has been roundly criticised, at least in some quarters, for embracing a kind of radical philosophical idealism taken to the very point of absurdity (Østerud, 1996).¹¹ It is most likely postmodernists’ palpable ‘linguist turn’, their focus on symbols and text, which accounts for this. The complaint is nevertheless based on a misunderstanding. To be fair to the critics, it is a misunderstanding easily fuelled by the heterogeneity, verging on incoherence, which seems to abound in the loose category of the postmodern.¹² Nevertheless, the focus of those thinkers who have exerted the greatest influence on postmodernism as an intellectual movement is not, as commonly supposed, upon symbols and text themselves. Rather such writers as Derrida and Foucault are most concerned with how such representations comprise the process of communication itself. The focus, in short, is on what Habermas conceives as ‘speech acts’ (1984) and what Derrida himself would characterise as the necessarily collaborative and open-ended practice of writing (1982: 1-28; Wood, 1985). In these terms, postmodernism can be understood as a continuation of that sceptical trail of introspection begun by Descartes (Arendt, 1958; Descartes, 1993 [1641]) whose most influential expression is the Humean phenomenology that has become so central to conventional wisdom on the character of scientific practice.

Hume recognised that the objective world was accessible only through the limited and indirect impression it left upon the senses of the individual. The human world is thus one of appearances. Cause and effect might be posited to inhabit the objective reality beyond our apprehension, but they can be evident to us only as a conjunction of events in our experience, that is, the repeated juxtaposition of phenomena, as they appear to us in our perceptions (Hume, 1999 [1748]).¹³

Phenomenological scepticism identifies the epistemological limits of the subject's apprehension of the physical object, following the Cartesian dualism also inherited from Descartes. At the same time, Hume's phenomenology commits a curious act of faith – and logical error – in assuming the mutual accessibility of individual experiences. The comparability and intelligibility of the phenomena of each individual's sense-data are taken for granted. Yet if our senses can give us only indirect access to an objective world it would seem that the subjective experiences of other individuals, who we can apprehend – if at all – only as objects of our perception, are at least as far removed and indirectly and uncertainly experienced as any other 'object'. Nevertheless, in the social sciences such a presupposition has become so paradigmatic as to disguise and oversimplify the activity of inquiry itself to a remarkable degree.

The behavioural revolution spurred investigators to focus on what people actually do in the only way this can be apprehended. This means considering actions as they appear to us, in the manner, to use the appropriate jargon, of 'behavioural phenomena'. Such an approach epitomised for its proponents a kind of hard-headed realism, eschewing the speculative interpretation of motivations, feelings and belief, so long the hermeneutic bread and butter of the quasi-scientific discipline of History.¹⁴ The reality of such behavioural studies was typically something entirely different, however. The behaviour would appear, of course, only in the apprehension of immediate participants and observers, and be recorded in a variety of texts, themselves to be further reproduced and removed from 'the scene of the crime' by a process of journalistic and scholarly reportage and interpretation.

Untroubled by the incommensurability of individual experiences, positivists saw 'behaviour' where a sceptical pluralist such as Derrida would come to see a lattice-work of overlapping texts, mediating between diverse individuals, who are continually and irremediably divided from one another by varying degrees of removal in time and space. This partly explains the postmodern concern with time and space. Spatially, postmodernists are inclined to confront the problem of cultural imperialism which flows from the domineering 'presence' (Wood, 1982), which authorises and underscores the meta-narrative. Temporally,

the instability of signifiers in constant flight and mutation demands resistance of the misleading, artificial and ultimately futile, fixing of meanings to be found in positivism's toolbox of operational terms. The postmodernist point of departure is thus a sceptical deconstruction of a central inductive claim conventionally presupposed – and seldom explicitly defended – in mainstream social scientific research. This is the claim that phenomenological accounts share a rational and disinterested structure of meaning that allows their unproblematic communication across time and space. This constitutes the indispensable presupposition which allows us to expect that such accounts can be represented, integrated and accumulated in the symbolic and categorical forms in which they comprise our social scientific data. When researchers gather, accumulate and compare data on voting behaviour, for example, they depend on the reliability and mutual intelligibility of the concepts and descriptions employed and exchanged, not least, the meaning and significance of 'voting' itself.

In one crucial respect, postmodernism does represent a realist turn, in social science as well as intellectual life more generally. Postmodernists take the 'realist'¹⁵ focus of Hume and his followers on the phenomenal level and unpack the actual process by means of which notes on phenomena must be shared. The process is intrinsically physical in as much as the acts of communication themselves depend on negotiating distance in both space and time. The emphasis on the way individual autonomy creates a physical and ultimately unbridgeable epistemological gap also represents a continuation of a conservatively individualistic current within Western political thought. This 'Whiggish' line of thinking is to be found in the aftermath of the French Revolution in the work of Edmund Burke (2001 [1790]) and, more recently, that of Friedrich Hayek (2006 [1960], 1982). For both these writers, the social generalisation is ultimately a single individual's hubristic attempt to speak for the unknowable experience of others from the vantage-point of her own limited perspective. For Hayek this practical epistemological problem is resolved by the miracle of civil society's spontaneous order, a version of the 'invisible hand' Adam Smith (1976 [1776]) attributed to the market. For Burke, the answer lies in 'the wisdom of the constitution', meaning tried-and-tested tradition and trusting our 'betters'.¹⁶ In this respect, much postmodern theory and practice can be understood as providing a distinctive reworking of a central concept in the work of another liberal theorist, John Stuart Mill (1985 [1859]). More or less explicitly they embrace his notion and standard of 'individuality', whose measure is the diversity of experience, perspective and mode of living that must, above all, be acknowledged, respected and embraced. It is in these terms that writers such as Foucault and Derrida can be considered to

express a kind of ‘sceptical pluralism’. A similar consciousness of individuality or difference infuses the aesthetic of contemporary art as clearly as it does the meta-theory informing the critical margins of social science.

Postmodern architecture, for example, rejects the overarching perspective and singular functionalism of the International School (Harvey, 1989). Instead it seems to respond to the thought exercise of preparing the built environment for the contingencies of a diverse range of visitors and users on each of their unique spatio-temporal trajectories. A good example is the Norwegian College of Fishery Science, completed in 1994 (see Figure 1). The architect



Figure 1: *Norwegian College of Fishery Science*, by Steinsvik Arkitektkontor AS, 1994

appears to have imagined the possibilities of a variety of passages through and stays within the environment. Its aesthetic is hence envisaged less in terms of its grand overall functional elegance (perhaps best appreciated at an abstracting distance) and more in terms of an anticipated plurality of views, many of which are assumed to be mobile. Literary criticism, on the other hand, has largely relinquished the quest for the definitive account of the author's true intention, and hence the text's authoritative meaning, in favour of unpacking the multitude of individual experiential (or intertextual) associations made possible by any incidence of fluid and endlessly reinterpreted and recontextualised language (Lothe, 2005; Barthes, 1991). I would thus argue that it is possible to identify a consistent postmodern sensibility infusing a variety of fields of epistemological and cultural (not least, popular-cultural) expression. Film is no exception.

Meanwhile, from the 19th Century onwards, the modern novel had increasingly submitted to a radical form of introspection, still more firmly embedded in a literal or metaphorical first-person singular perspective. The psychological experience and journey of the protagonist thus takes centre stage: the apogee of modern individualistic self-expression. This is exemplified by such works as Dostojevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Hamsun's *Hunger*, Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Outsider*, to pick a few of the most prominent examples. It may nevertheless be the very centrality of the novel in Western cultural life from the 19th Century onwards that accounts for its own ground-breaking departure from the model it had so clearly epitomised. Thus the work of James Joyce, in particular, starting in 1922 with *Ulysses* and continuing with *Finnegan's Wake* in 1939, decoupled the representation of consciousness from its role as the vehicle of narrative progression and even its very association with an individualised subject.

Such a departure from classic individualism is almost immediately echoed where the most experimental cinema of the time was being produced, that is, in the Soviet Union. Just seven years after the publication of *Ulysses*, Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* takes us on a similar polyphonic journey through a single day, but here presented as a novel form of documentary rather than as fiction, as well as a *tour-de-force* of novel cinematic techniques. In general, the individualistic identification with the protagonist is increasingly disrupted through the turn to 'realism', the kind of '*cinema verité*' to emerge in the 1950s and 60s in the work of the French New Wave and British 'kitchen-sink' drama. The cinematic perspective, at least beyond the Hollywood mainstream, has continued to become more pluralistic, the evaluative reference-point of the implied narrator more ambivalent, echoing similar developments in the novel and the theatre. This can be observed in more recent works such as

the influential director's cut of *Blade Runner* of 1992 (released originally with a *film-noir*-style narrator voice-over, 10 years before). Interestingly, later work, including the commercial output of Hollywood, increasingly expresses this pluralistic individualism – or autonomous individuality – by disrupting the temporal structure of the narrative itself. The possibility of perspectives being not only diverse but also non-consecutive, in the manner of dreams, the capricious free-association of modern psycho-analysis or, indeed, the modern 'pluralism' of an increasingly 'channel-switching' media technology, increasingly permeates film, including its most mainstream variety, the Hollywood 'blockbuster'. This is highlighted by the unusual narrative form adopted by 'star director' Quentin Tarantino in the huge box-office success *Pulp Fiction*, in 1994.

If the principle thrust of postmodernism in the arts has been one or another form of re-contextualisation, more recent developments, which have blurred the boundary between the non-fictional documentary and the fictional feature, seem to constitute a form of real or imagined *de*-contextualisation. There seems to have been a general increase in the use of a kind of documentary form in popular culture, observable in such diverse contexts as the TV game-show and the homemade web-clip. This paradoxically renders the presence of the camera more conspicuous and the narrator or auteur behind the camera much less so.

Historical analysis

The linearity of Modernism collapses time and space, a feature of its universalism. In a variety of ways, Modernists ask us to share in a singular narrative vision of rational progress. It is singular in its logo-centric correctness and universal in its supposed collective relevance and appeal to a rationality taken to be the hallmark of an indelible human nature. This helps explain the paradoxical tendency towards a collectivist kind of individualism in European and Western culture. The variable intensity with which this collectivist tendency has been asserted has been at the centre of most Western political conflicts since at least the time of Rousseau. Perhaps the archetypal collectivist cultural form is that of the narrative, the story whose structure and broad intelligibility generates and reinforces common understandings, including and especially core beliefs and values. Explicitly programmatic and political varieties, such as Marx's *Capital* or Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, might be – and sometimes are – referred to as 'grand narratives'.

If there is such a thing as a postmodern cultural phenomenon, this entails, above all, a challenge to the collectivising thrust of Western individualism. Sensitivity to the continual flux of competing perspectives has found a multitude of cultural expressions. The paintings of Picasso and other ‘cubists’, for example, portray imagined spaces as comprised by multiple vantage-points. Picasso’s *Guernica*, from 1937 is perhaps the best known and most striking example. The portrait of Picasso by Juan Gris, from 1912 (see Figure 2), however, is a better illustration of the ‘classical’ cubist approach to visual representation. Postmodern



Figure 2: *Portrait of Picasso*, by Juan Gris, 1912

architecture also incorporates difference, not only by literally building geo-historical diversity self-consciously (and often ironically) into its structures, but also by designing the built environment as the site of a multitude of mobile perspectives and experiences. Such artistic and architectural initiatives are further reflected in the way postmodernist social inquiry explicitly challenges the generalising individual perspective conventionally authorised and

legitimised by recourse to standards of rigour associated with ‘proper’ behavioural (as in positivist) science. In broad historical terms, then, a renewed – or reconceived – realism in the realm of popular culture occurs in the midst of a powerful cultural trend towards all things differentiating and individualising. Hence the consideration of the attributes of that species of realism increasingly favoured in the construction of the cinematic narrative (and paralleled in other visual media) promises to illuminate our understanding of the scope and meaning of that trend. The reason for framing this specifically as a kind of *historical* analysis is to signal that a case is to be made that a certain kind of realism increasingly favoured in contemporary cultural output, exemplified by but not restricted to film, represents a critical marker of cultural and social change. In these terms it might usefully be compared with the advent of novel and individualistic forms of realism of a much earlier era, namely those increasingly favoured by artists and authors of the Renaissance period onwards.

Let us attempt to distil a sense of the key elements of an emerging ‘documentary style’, as evidenced in the changing approaches to cinematic representation and narrative of recent years. We opened our discussion with a short passage of dialogue taken from a recent feature film, *District 9*, which employs the device of a fictional documentary presentation of (fictional) events. The style here intrudes explicitly and ironically in the form of parody but its presence is more ubiquitous if typically more subtle. Perhaps a more representative example is the work of the influential though hardly mainstream director, Mike Leigh. What distinguishes his output from more conventional film-making – for the viewer – is her acquaintance with an apparently more unvarnished impression of the everyday. *High Hopes*, from 1988, is a good example. The action, in its halting rhythm and psycho-social uncertainties and hesitations, evokes a sense of spontaneously unfolding events so telling that one might plausibly wonder if the characters are being observed in situ, going about their ‘real’, daily business. How is this effect achieved?

Leigh’s methods are no secret. Their central feature is a heavy reliance on improvisation. Scripts in this context constitute no more than broad guidelines, often left deliberately open-ended in order to create uncertainties and challenges that the actor must cope with in relative ignorance of likely outcomes, mimicking the contingencies of ‘real life’. The actor is encouraged to operate as a problem-solver, simulating situations with her fellow actors where each must improvise the way their respective and/or common issues are to be managed or resolved. Leigh’s approach illustrates a broad strategy of representation common to numerous exponents of the ‘new verisimilitude’. The author, though not entirely dead, submits to the role of what Foucault would call a kind of conductor of natural human forces,

as the role of government was envisaged by the early theorists of the self-regulating market (Foucault, 2007). To use the term most popular in contemporary popular parlance, the author has become a facilitator. As such, she engages in a highly pluralistic form of representation. Take 'Reality TV'. As the almost hegemonic programme genre of the day, it presents itself as a kind of 'fly on the wall' observation of unfolding 'real' events. Their reality, however, is shaped by a number of far from inconsequential strategic interventions, which are essentially authorial.

First, the stage is painstakingly set through careful profiling and selection of participants and design of the restrictive conditions under which they will be required to operate while under observation. Second, the 'action' is orchestrated, sifted and selected, edited and hence shaped into meaningful and integrated episodes with a genuine narrative structure. What little, if any, of the footage is presented live is even more minutely orchestrated, typically by means of the outside intervention of a 'presenter'.

Derrida introduces a distinctive understanding of 'presence' in his account of the typical discursive strategies of Western thinkers, which he conceives as a kind of 'logo-centrism'. He argues that writers typically lend authority to their arguments by recourse to an unassailable term, meaning or experience of their own that is held to be unquestionable, a kind of given universal. Describing this as a kind of presence, of course, emphasises its actual particularity in both time and space, and to that specific, postulating individual. The 'presence' of Saussure's structuralist account of language, for instance, is a fundamental cognitive meaning (in practice, Saussure's, as one, single individual) from which the specific uses of terms are ultimately derived. The underlying cognitive meaning thus determines how such terms are to be properly understood.

The notion of presence as capturing a spatio-temporal immediacy might usefully be adapted, arguably in a way that is true to Derrida's notion of the continual deferment, or reproduction, of meaning. It might here describe the sense of immediacy of cinematic representation as an emphasis and intensification of the experiential presence of the viewed 'event'. Insofar as the film focuses attention on a sense of the experiential moment *dislocated* from any broader structural or narrative context we might thus understand this as working in the absolute opposite direction to textual strategies of logo-centrism. In these terms we have garnered some support for the view that the rise of the 'documentary style' in visual media is almost archetypically postmodern. It is nevertheless essential to emphasise at this point that so-called postmodern initiatives, including the cinematic ones with which we have been primarily concerned, are not simple opposites of what Derrida considers to be Modernism's

'presence'-privileging logo-centrism, as we may have implied. The interesting thing about the documentary style of visual representation is the way it also privileges a presence, not as the basis of an authoritative narrative, but as a hallmark of authenticity and, implicitly, a celebration of difference. Postmodernism's own logo-centrism privileges the presence attributed to the authentic, unvarnished individual. It is the authenticity of her phenomenological experience or being, which constitutes the implicit presence, which authorises strategies of deconstruction as well as prohibitions against most forms of integrative narrative.

What is at stake in resolving such intrinsically problematic questions of authenticity is the continual quest within the realm of social science to secure the value and meaning of research. In these terms, a statement's authenticity operates as a much valued if typically misunderstood indicator of its reliability as data. The problematic character of such authenticity and the disagreement this can engender is nicely illustrated in a provocative and literally dramatic form in Laurel Richardson's unique study (1993).

If the preceding discussion is adequate as a reasonably accurate, albeit preliminary, sketch of the posited trend in visual representation, what might we deduce to be its likely psychological, social and political effects? In the absence, so far, of any systematic empirical study, we might begin, at least, by establishing some promising lines of inquiry, that is, some provisional propositions regarding likely effects that are worthy of further investigation.

The apparent naturalness of the actors'¹⁷ dialogue and interaction derives from their relative lack of fluency. This is actually twofold. On one level, this is experienced in the sense of the halting and erratic use of language, including the non-verbal bodily communication of movements and gestures. On another (more meta-) level is the experience of a more generalised disintegration, which parallels the one occurring on the linguistic level. This meta-level disintegration entails the dislocation (notwithstanding the authorial-editorial decisions described above) of episodes and/or exchanges from a broader narrative context. What are the implications of all this as a kind of reframing of perspective, as a contribution to, or adaptation of, a kind of world view or what Foucault (1990) and Ruggie (1993) might call an episteme?

One rather obvious and facile supposition about such 'reality media' should be discounted without further ado, namely that they are perceived in a way identical or even similar to live interaction with, or observation of, others. Rather we have substituted a cinematic convention, betokening live interaction, for 'the real thing'. There is some evidence to suggest that they are experienced quite differently. The explanation for this lies

in the importance of framing (Butler, 2009). Goffmann's study of broadcasting, for example, demonstrates how the various 'influencies', slips and gaffes that are unlikely to be remembered later, or even perceived at the time, in interpersonal conversation are picked up quite assiduously by listeners or viewers (1982: 197-327). The framing of material as a transmission and a presentation seems to be decisive for the way it is heard or perceived, despite the best efforts of broadcasters to constitute and portray it as a kind of 'fresh talk' or facsimile thereof. It seems to be received more analytically, with more attention to detail and more sensitivity to its shortcomings. In other words, everyday speech is likely to be perceived as more fluent than comparable 'everyday speech' witnessed on the average 'mocumentary', self-posted Youtube clip, reality show or Mike Leigh feature.

What this suggests, I believe, is that information processing is, not unsurprisingly, heavily influenced by its degree of contextualisation and the associated relative complexity of tasks required of the 'processor'. The more disassociated is an event, episode, instant, or any other phenomenological fragment, the more attention is liable to be concentrated on its dissection, the more closely (but not necessarily more intelligently) it is liable to be 'read'. The main reason small errors are edited out of our perception of conversations is that our attention is partly elsewhere, on the broader spatial and social context of the interaction, on the narrative or dialogic context of the exchange. Details are passed over as inconsequential as the listener both refers what is said *back* to its 'historical' context and *forward* to its anticipated future trajectory. In these terms, the 'new verisimilitude' both reflects and intensifies broader cultural trends of an era of proliferating and diversifying channels of electronic media, towards information profusion, coupled with an associated narrowing of the customary attention span. Such narrowing, it should be emphasised, cannot simply be characterised as a kind of attention deficit for the corollary of a narrowing of attention is its concentration, though this may jar with the customary association of concentration with attention that is not only intensively engaged but also reasonably sustained, according to certain conventional criteria of duration derived from the specific usage. Perhaps we can illustrate this through consideration of an everyday act and the implications of its variable relationship to broader contextual factors. A sexual act, for example, might receive less divided attention to the degree that it is disengaged from broader considerations, such as the implications of pregnancy, the potential transmission of disease, or contractual and/or moral obligations as invoked by the institution of marriage, to name a few of the most obvious. The example illustrates that a complex hermeneutical context does not necessarily translate into

attention to or concentration on the matter at hand. In fact, in many instances, the effect may be quite the reverse!

In short, an attention-narrowing hermeneutical dislocation seems to be associated with the kind of cinematic representations we have been considering. This raises immediate and ominously intractable questions of causality, which we cannot hope to resolve here. What we can do is draw attention to some of the key questions herein raised by considering the phenomenon of what we might call ‘dislocated representation’ in its broader social-historical context. There is one obvious objection to our suggestion that popular culture is undergoing a kind of fragmentation that we should consider first, however.

The profusion of information and information channels leads, among other things, to the conspicuous spectacle of multi-tasking, the cliché, for example, not without some basis in reality, of the teenager who manages to engage more or less simultaneously in conversation, school work, watching television, and communicating and/or playing on computer and/or telephone. This suggests the possibility of the opposite formulation, that technology induced changes in media have lent a new integrative complexity to the perspective or world view of its archetypal ‘denizens’. At the very least, one is drawn to the more nuanced assessment that contemporary individuals are rather beginning to exchange the traditional and homogenising forms of integrative complexity for new, more spontaneous and pluralistic ones. While there is some truth to such a claim, it should not disguise the character of this exchange of one type of integration for another, and the radical difference of these in both form and degree. The kind of multi-tasking described is a complex coordination of discrete, compartmentalised and hence relatively simple tasks.¹⁸ It is not integration in the sense of individual impressions or terms connected with others in formation of a broader structure of meaning, logical or narrative. Let us turn now to the social-historical context of this compartmentalisation.

Such cultural developments are closely connected to broader social trends associated with the development and evolution of capitalist production and distribution. Intensification of the pace and spread of the scale of production follow, as Harvey argues, from the profit- and associated growth-imperative of corporations, with various technological and organisational innovations the *via medium* (1989). Thus, in the early 20th Century, Fordism concentrated production in ever larger single-site factories, taking advantage of the technical potential for a more intensive division and acceleration of labour-power afforded by the automated assembly line. This ‘second industrial revolution’ was followed late in the Century by a third, facilitated by technical innovations in, and associated reduced costs of, transport and communications. The ‘third industrial revolution’ entailed the creation of complex

coordinated networks of heterogeneous stages of production, facilitated by organisational innovations such as contracting out and managing a faster turnover by means of a more limited inventory of productive stocks held at individual sites. Such post-fordist innovations in the techniques and organisation of production have created something akin to a networked 'global factory', emerging in tandem with the prodigious increase in the turnover and reach of transnational corporations in the last quarter of the 20th Century. In economic terms, these developments in the production of goods have been facilitated by the enormous concentration and centralisation of capital, a corollary of its competitive and expansive internal logic.

Such reorganisation and renewal of a society of producers have found their parallel in the self-conscious development of a more disciplined and better organised society of consumers. American corporations' strenuous efforts and investment in advertising in the 1920s and 30s is well documented (Ewen, 1976). Industrialists of the time recognised the pressing need to secure (and to a large extent create) markets for the unprecedented volumes of goods unleashed by the second industrial revolution. Here lie the origins of further huge waves of investment poured into marketing and advertising since the Second World War, which have given rise to a formidable consumer culture of near global reach. The complex connections between that consumer culture and popular culture more generally are an enormous area of study in their own right. For our purposes, it will suffice to draw what should be regarded as plausible lines of connection, at least, between the logic of consumerism and the logic of contemporary film.

The international scale and reach of contemporary industry has had a number of effects on the approach to and content of its advertising, some of which have recently been canvassed by Benjamin Barber (2007). The psychological mechanics of brand identification have in any case long promoted strategies of immediacy (elicited by the impact of messages and cues of short duration) and repetition. More recently, the sheer contingencies of spatial-temporal scale have led towards something Benjamin describes as the infantilisation of the target consumer. This is twofold: first, literally targeting children as the most effective way to establish the firm foundations of faithful, long-term consumers; second, appealing to the lowest common denominator of the basic appetites of adults, which are more easily manipulated through the trans-linguistic medium of simple visual forms.

The attenuation of 'traditional' forms of communication, I would argue, is fuelled by the logic of advertising and, on a still deeper level, the underlying intensification of the scope and pace of economic production. There are two features of this tendency, taken as a whole, we might note. One is the perhaps uniquely postmodern phenomenon of a false pluralistic

authenticity, which functions, in practice, as a mechanism invoking the validity and authority of individually packaged statements or images. The editorial packaging of ‘reality TV’ described above is paralleled in the domain of advertising, which, at its most innovative, fuses a sense of earthy realism with the elegance of design and the eloquence of poetry.¹⁹ The mechanism has a more or less apparent underlying narrative structure, whether that of filmmakers or advertising executives, but this is at least partly disguised by the apparent simplicity and spontaneity of its component elements. This is why we might reasonably characterise its authenticity as essentially false.

The other feature, which has quite different implications, is that this false pluralism is partly a response to a productive and expressive pluralism, harnessed, at least initially, in the service of industry, which in many respects has broken new ground and escaped the control of that essentially capitalist agenda. Social networking, various internet-user portals for product sharing, and networked templates for collaborative social protest, such as ‘critical mass’ and ‘reclaim the streets’, all employ modes of coordination borrowed from commercial production and distribution. Yet they operate in their own terms as more (in the case of the most prominent social networks) or less non-commercial variants. It is such phenomena that lead Hardt and Negri, for example, to note the burgeoning power of ‘the multitude’ to resist the global reach and encompassing power of a kind of de-territorialised ‘Empire’ held increasingly to supersede the traditional order of sovereign states (2000). What our consideration of film as a medium should reveal is the complex disintegrative and re-integrative processes at work in contemporary, globalising popular culture and qualify our expectations for the emancipatory potential of an increasingly networked multitude. Two important points are worth emphasising in this respect.

First is the relatively passive quality of the reception and processing of such heterogeneous but also homogeneously piecemeal and weakly contextualised networks and communications. The ability of past generations to take onboard and act upon a relatively sophisticated manifesto for social and political change, as did the various European socialist movements of the late-19th and early-20th Centuries, may be one distinguishing characteristic of the modern episteme and political consciousness, in contradistinction to the ‘postmodern’. Nevertheless, there are clear limits to such passivity. Passivity with regard to the processing of information does not necessarily translate into passivity with regard to action, as an international assortment of recent uprisings, social disorders and waves of protest will attest. This brings us to the second point about contemporary popular culture, which should be emphasised.

The enhanced propensity for relatively spontaneous and yet organised collective action is nonetheless likely to have two features, which are in a sense disintegrative. Social mobilisation that is only sketchily narrated is likely to be both relatively narrow in focus, creating a limited agenda pertaining to specific issues, and relatively negative, since simple rejection of specific affronts or regimes has more immediate inclusive potential than any positive, broad, programmatic agenda, likely to require considerable argument and persuasion. In such sociological terms, we might regard the European fascist movements of the mid-20th Century as a kind of postmodern prototype.

In sum, the most important effect of more intensely pluralistic forms of communication, of which the proliferation of the 'documentary style' of representation is a good example, is an intensification of the long modern history of social individualisation at the most fundamental, discursive and cognitive level. At first sight, this suggests not so much an epistemic sea-change as a further progression of an intrinsically capitalist (and hence Modern) trend. However, the immersion of the contemporary individual in unprecedentedly rigorous networks of both production and consumption increasingly isolates and inoculates that individual – not only against ideas or manifestos for social change. She is also increasingly isolated and inoculated against important patterns of socialisation, which uphold the central institutions and cultural practices on which capitalism depends. Such socialisation has emerged from the logical and narrative structures of discourses upon (or stories about) the substance and importance of civil liberties, the connection of a system of representative government to ideals of democracy, and the origins and meaning of a self-regulating market society as a kind of natural order, to name some of the most important. Thus undermined are the tacit though critical foundations on which the healthy functioning of capitalist society and liberal democratic states depend. One reason for the increasing vulnerability of various political orders around the globe (or specific manifestations of a global order) is the way capitalist production, in intensifying its cultural reach, in order to maintain and enhance the pace and volume of both production and consumption, has begun to undermine its own cultural and political underpinnings. It is as though the necessary intensity of a philosophy of personal gain, further amplified by a creative and relatively autonomous popular culture, has begun to undermine the way this has always been necessarily but perhaps less obviously tempered by such considerations as respect for the rule of law and the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. The latter constitute an eroding broader narrative and hermeneutical context to the intensifying turnover of images and imperatives pertaining to consumption.

Modern society facilitates capitalist production and the market mechanism and the dominant forms of organisation that follow from these. It does so by means of a political-judicial framework of relatively liberal states (negotiating the terms, first and foremost of relatively unconditional private property rights) supplemented and/or supplanted by various innovations in the realms of international law and inter-governmental organisation. The bedrock of this society is the incorporation of the vast majority into its economic activities (mostly as wage-labourers or salaried employees) and its dominant form of political association, the state (as citizens). Particularly at the most troubled margins of this order, in what are usually referred to as less developed countries, there is a considerable prolonged exodus from legally sanctioned and protected capitalist economic activity, entering a quasi-feudal realm, which fuses economic acquisition and political association through identification and employment with and exclusive membership in various genres of gang, clan or mafia organisation.²⁰

Moreover, exit from the dominant, legitimate game, of 17th-century vintage, occurs in a more insidious form, through eruptions of resistance or disorder of a relatively loosely organised and spontaneous kind. Many of these, such as this year's rioting and looting in the United Kingdom, have short-term and prosaic, acquisitive goals. More legitimate forms of provisional association and action parallel these outlying disruptions. Associations of predominantly middle-class house-owners in gated communities organised as 'Common Interest Developments (CIDs), for example, marshal a concerted effort in the service of a specific, short-term goal, that is, speculation on the equity appreciation of residential property. Furthermore, as a form of organisation, the CID institutes a local autonomous realm with its own institutional and regulatory order.²¹

Such centrifugal movements, more or less divorced from the dominant juridical order of states and property relationships, undermine the collectivist project of the Enlightenment and its motor, the capitalist model of wealth accumulation. The increasing salience of the grey economy (as well as novel and typically provisional modes of governance) arises from a narrowing of time and space horizons, and a simplification of narrative context. These are expressed and fuelled by the kinds of innovations in popular culture we have been examining in the preceding pages. In short, an epistemic compartmentalisation is paralleled by an economic and political one, supporting our provisional speculation that contemporary developments can be interpreted as expressing a burgeoning transformation of the political-economic order of the Modern era. This reflects the much noted paradoxical quality of a globalisation whose integration is increasingly associated with, and belied by, the active

management, regulation and control of those boundary-breaching flows deemed most problematic by various authorities, namely all those constituted by human subjects (Shamir, 2005). It is not within the ambit of this paper to speculate as to the future direction, let alone end-point (in terms of some novel and relatively stable institutional equilibrium) of such social and political changes. It must suffice for our purposes to have noted their distinguishing characteristics, key hermeneutical features, and the most striking strengths and weaknesses of their *modus operandi*.

Conclusion

We began with the supposition that indicators of fundamental cultural – or ‘epistemic’ – change might be found that might help us evaluate the profundity of contemporary social and political developments, and inform our understanding of their meaning and implications. Assuming visual media might be a good place to look for such indicators, we identified a trend within cinematic representation with a plausibly strong connection to broader cultural developments and intellectual movements associated with postmodernism. It can be argued that there is a kind of pluralistic realism and associated radical individuation infusing postmodernism more generally that is reflected in that form of realism increasingly to be observed in visual media. This is a tendency away from the more ‘classic’ individualistic and life-story-integrating narrative towards a self-conscious realism, achieved by the relative disarticulation of action and narrative associated with a contemporary ‘documentary style’. The key feature – and convention – of the ‘documentary style’ as a form of representation is its portrayal of what is real in terms of intense identifications with discrete, individual and compartmentalised statements or gestures. These denote a level of authentic experience tantamount to the kind of authoritative ‘presence’ described by Derrida. Thus embodied and exemplified is a kind of postmodern perspective or episteme, which is roaming, of short though intense attention span, and weakly integrated into any broader narrative frame. Such a perspective is conducive to political action, or at least social unrest, whose rationale is defined in relatively narrow and negative terms. The disaggregation in the visual field is paralleled by the disaggregation in the political one, suggesting that the continuing emergence of temporally provisional and heterogeneous micro-orders (or disorders) is culturally deep rooted. This is therefore the continuing pattern of social and political change likely to be

dominant in the years ahead, as opposed to movements, such as radical Islamism, more orientated towards the reordering of society at the behest of a grand design.

The world, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, is manmade. The way we see and represent that world is critical to the prospects for how it is likely to be reproduced or re-formed. The intention of this paper has been to lend some small insight into the relationship between social representation and social reproduction. There are grounds for supposing that we have collectively come to see the world in a way distinctive to our time. It is a way of seeing decreasingly conducive to the old and now creaking institutions of Westphalia, The Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. The new world view is much more conducive to an active (and reactive) politics of contingent, short-term alliances, movements and associations in the service of narrow and negatively formulated objectives. It is a far cry from the collectivising individualist world view that formed the mainstay of the modern nation-state and the capitalist society it sought to govern and to serve.

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¹ The historical references on this point are legion. The most notable are perhaps Polyani (2001 [1944]) and Anderson (1979).

² The theme is much explored, not only in philosophy but also literature, most explicitly by Kundera (1985) but many others besides, including Conrad (1994).

³ The classic work applying cognitive theory to the field of international relations and foreign policy is that of Jervis (1976).

⁴ To avoid unnecessary conceptual digression we will henceforth use postmodernism to describe a broad and admittedly highly problematic category of language-orientated social theorists. Post-structuralism will be set to one side as having a more specific meaning relating to the historical development of a kind of deconstructivist epistemology, most notably in the work of Derrida, in opposition to the structuralism associated with but not restricted to Saussure. See Wood on this subject (1985).

⁵ This is a point emphasised by Benjamin (2005 [1936]). See also Berger (1972).

⁶ Lothe notes how literary conventions make it natural for readers to trust the narrator unless otherwise advised (2005: 25).

⁷ Perhaps the most striking example to be found is in the work of Henry Miller. See especially *Tropic of Cancer*, first published in 1934, and *Tropic of Capricorn*, in 1938.

⁸ Such tendencies in the auditory processing of speech are well documented, as Goffman notes (1982: 206-8).

⁹ It also reflects apparent audience adaptability where tried-and-tested and hence recognisable conventions are concerned. The most obvious lie in the nature of the media themselves, that images on a screen or movements on a stage might be treated as though they were occurring in 'real life'. There are many such conventions, which, used properly, seem able to invoke the customary 'suspension of disbelief'.

¹⁰ The philosopher most closely associated with the linguistic turn, in emphasising that philosophy is better equipped to analyse the use and meaning of language than to uncover empirical truths, namely Wittgenstein, might nevertheless be characterised as a kind of philosophical idealist (2000 [1922]). See also Rorty (1992).

¹¹ Even the most cursory acquaintance with the work of Derrida is enough to throw such a facile assumption into question, since his work took the form, quite self-consciously, of an attack on what he saw as the idealism of thinkers such as Husserl and Saussure. See Wood (1985) and Derrida (1982).

¹² Jarvis attempts to make sense of this heterogeneity through a threefold typology, dividing postmodernism into 'technological or productionist', critical (and broadly neo-Marxist), and 'subversive or deconstructive' varieties (1998).

¹³ See the philosophical realist critique of Hume in Bhasker (1975).

¹⁴ Perhaps the most influential pioneer of a behavioural approach to politics was David Easton. See especially Easton (1953).

¹⁵ Roy Bhaskar, for example, notes Hume's failure to give adequate weight to the role and significance of an objective world of things – beyond perception – constitutes a failure to take a fully coherent and genuinely realist philosophical position (1975).

¹⁶ The argued affinity of conservative political theory and postmodernism is canvassed at greater length in Robinson (2002).

¹⁷ 'Actor' is used here in a broad sense that also includes participants in 'reality' TV programming.

¹⁸ Note that this reflects the kind of coordination increasingly required of employees insofar as they contribute to a kind of post-Fordist system of production.

¹⁹ A good example is the recent series of TV commercials of Why Not Associates for First Direct Bank. See: http://www.whynotassociates.com/en/first_direct/first_direct.php.

²⁰ This is what Duffield regards as the hallmarks of the increasingly institutionally hollowed out 'post-adjustment state' (Duffield, 1998).

²¹ McKenzie (1994) remains the best account of the organisational and political logic of CIDs. See also Blakely and Snyder (1997) and Law (2003) on gated communities.